

Chapter Thirteen -- The Old Churchyard

Sometimes I wonder if a good deal of our confusion and uncertainty about life isn't tied up with the unreality of death.

Death doesn't mean the same in our modern city life as it used to back in the mountains and small towns that I remember. There's plenty of it, in newspapers and movies and on the radio, but it's all so general it doesn't come close to us at all.

Even when it's a close friend or a member of the family that dies, it still is so far away it's hard to believe.

Maybe we've known it was coming and waited for it, or perhaps it was sudden -- a heart attack or an accident. In the long run it doesn't make much difference, somehow.

We call up the undertaker, who is now a mortician, or a "funeral home". We drop over next day, and there is Bill, in a coffin his family couldn't afford, floating on a pink cloud of unreality. He has on what looks like a suit of clothes, but if you're so tactless as to pull at it you'll see it's only a false front, like so many other things about our living today.

The preacher and a handful of friends come in for the funeral service, which is some Bible reading and prayers, both out of a book made to fit a hundred thousand such affairs. Then we ride to the graveyard, which isn't even a cemetery any more, since it's become a "memorial park".

There, at least, you'd figure we had to get down to brass tacks, for the time has come for Bill to go back to the earth from

which he came. But you'd never guess it, if somebody hadn't told you.

Not a bit of dirt is in sight, anywhere. There's a neat little tent, with a carpet of make-believe grass all around, and Bill's "slumber couch" (coffin is a bad word now, and even casket won't do) sits on straps on a neat aluminum frame. When the preacher commits his body to the earth, he drops some rose petals or sweet peas that have been slipped into his hand. And then everybody but the hired men must go away, for it's all over, and if even the family wants to stay to see Bill safely underground the mortician looks at them with such shocked surprise that they dassen't do anything but tuck their tails between their legs an' slink away like a dog caught suckin' eggs.

Unless Bill worked right beside you or lived in the same house, you hardly notice the difference; and even then just because of the gap that's left, or the new face that takes the place of his. If he was a brother you may start a time or two to think: "I must tell Bill about that." And then you realize with a sick loneliness that you can never tell him anything again. But that doesn't last long or come often.

Back in the mountains there might not be more than three or four deaths in a year in the neighborhood. But they were something you wouldn't forget soon.

Even if it was just a little baby that had died, or the trashiest man on the creek, it meant that everyone had to take a hand.

Maybe you never stopped to think about it, but a corpse has to be prepared for burial. If it was a woman or a child, the

women of the settlement were the ones who bathed the body, dressed it in its best, and laid it out. If it was big boy or a man, the men tended to that, and somebody had to shave him, or trim the beard, and the hair. If he hadn't anything fit to wear, somebody gave it, without grudging.

If the family could afford it, they might send to Paintsville or Louisa for a coffin from the furniture store. More likely John Tackett would go out to his workshop, and work all night, forming one from heavy plank of white oak or walnut or wild cherry, and lining it, and putting in holes for the screws to hold the lid. And when he finished one, it would be nice.

Till it was ready, the dead person would be laid out on a bed, and maybe if it was a poor family, the neighbors would have supplied clean white sheets for that, too.

Part of the time the relatives would sit in the room -- the near kin if there were any. Neighbor women would bring in food -- lightbread, and ham, and fried chicken; cakes, pies, and all kinds of things, even to the pickles and preserves. From early morning till late in the evening they would be on hand to help.

At night they would be there, too, if the dead was a woman or a girl. If it was a man, two or three neighbor men would sit up with the corpse at night. At midnight others would come to take their places till morning.

I still remember the thrill of pride that came when they asked Walter and Guy Camp and me to sit up from midnight till morning with John Ansley when he died during the flu epidemic. It was a sort of recognition of our being grown up, though I was only sixteen, and wouldn't have been thought of if so many hadn't been sick

or worn out with work and watching.

For a little while we found things to talk about, and even told a ghost story or two in low tones. We talked about how long he had been a steward in the Methodist church, and how we had worked for him on Saturdays and in the summer. But later on when the big farmhouse was very quiet we sat silent and gazed at the old harmonium, and the empty fire-place, -- for there must be no fire in a room with the dead -- and shivered with the chill.

And ever again my eyes would come back to the coffin where he lay with hands folded across his breast in the old style. And I would gaze till my eyes played tricks, and his breast seemed to stir with the even breathing of one who is asleep, and my heart leaped at the thought that he might have returned to life.

With a shudder I thought of the story of the man in West Tennessee whose wife died of yellow fever. But when he dreamed she had turned over in her coffin, he had her dug up, the old folks used to tell. And she not only had turned over, but in her agony had gnawed the flesh from the backs of her hands before she died.

But when I walked nearer the coffin I could see that Mr. Ansley still lay in the quiet of death, and I was glad I hadn't said anything to the others.

In winter the funeral would be on the third day, and in summer sooner, perhaps the same afternoon if death had come before dawn. That made it tough on the half dozen men who had volunteered to dig the grave, for no matter how hard the ground was, or how short the time, or how steady the rain, no one ever charged for digging a grave, even if it was for someone who was a perfect

stranger.

Funerals were usually in the afternoon. And at noon we would hear the tolling of the church bell, one stroke for each year of the dead man's age.

Of course, the funeral sermon was always uncertain and depended a great deal on the preacher. Whether it was a brief talk on the shortness of life and the certainty of death, or a fulsome eulogy which preached the dead straight into the pearly gates, might depend on the standing of the deceased in the community. But it did not depend on the pocketbook, for it was another service for which no charge was ever made.

Sometimes it might be tactlessly candid, like that of Brother Sorrels when John Sheets, the drayman shot himself.

"You all knew John," he told us flatly. "Only a few days ago you might have been able to help him. You might have said the word or reached out the hand of friendship that would have prevented this. Now it is too late.

"All we can do now is to leave his fate in the hands of a just and loving God, and resolve that we shall not miss such an opportunity to do good again."

I'm glad I can't remember the name of the man who preached the funeral when Mrs. Wadsworth died of typhoid, leaving a household of daughters, from the early teens down.

"Oh, girls," he would repeat, "you don't have no mother now. You never will see her again, nor have nobody to take you in her arms." Over and over he kept it up for more than an hour, till the poor girls almost cried their eyes out, and Father would have shot him, I think, if he'd had a gun.

But whatever hazards there were in the funeral sermon, it never tried to cover up the reality of death, nor its certainty.

Mostly the graveyards were close to the churches, often right around them, and everyone followed from the home or church to the grave. And after the coffin had been lowered into the rough-box, a shovelful of earth was thrown on it as the body was committed to the ground from whence it came, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Then the top of the rough-box was screwed on, and the worst moment of all came for the family, as they heard the clods thud onto it. But it was an honest sound, and after a little earth had fallen, each shovelful was almost silent.

As the grave was filled a little higher, those who held the big, long-handled spades would pass them over to others, who would take their turn at the work. And in some way, as we worked, we had a feeling as if we had taken communion, and were closer to God and our fellow men.

There were always one or two men in every settlement, experts, whose job it was to mound up the grave and smooth it off with the spade handles, after which the flowers were spread on it. Only then came the benediction, and we went home.

Somehow, with such memories of the churchyard, we didn't shun it, and perhaps that was why we all loved the song Mother used to sing:

Come, come with me to the old churchyard;
 Let us follow the path o'er the soft greensward.
 Friends slumber there in the sweetest repose,
 Released from this world's sad bereavements and woes.

Oh, weep not for them, for they weep no more.
 Oh, grieve not for them, for their grief is o'er.
 For deep is their sleep, though cold and hard
 Their pillow may be, in the old churchyard.

Death was a certainty, but seen so close it wasn't the horrible thing of mystery men have often pictured it.

We used to laugh over how little Ted Lester, who lisped, told Uncle Jesse: "The happieth day that ever I thaw wath when I thaw my dear old mother carried out of my door feet firtht." I know it sounds horrible, but we knew he was just trying to say how much he appreciated the way everyone helped the family, and what a nice funeral they had made it.

Ted never knew quite what he was saying, anyway, especially when he felt anything deep in his heart, or was excited.

We remembered that when his mother had fallen downstairs a few years before, he had run to Uncle Jesse's store, screaming:

"Jettie, Jettie, thend for Doctor Bayeth an' tell him to come right away, an' bring every inthrumment he'th got, an' borrow a few more. My dear ol' mother fell downthtairth an' broke her leg in both platheth. I picked her up an' laid her on the bed, an' I'm afraid every breath'll be her nekth one."

It wasn't till he got home with the doctor he found that his mother had escaped without a scratch or a bruise.

Graves didn't come with "perpetual care" in those days, and each family had to care for its own.

Of course our family buried up in the Swetnam graveyard, away

up on the hill above Grandpa Swetnam's house, where Aunt Lucy still goes to tend the graves and plant flowers. And every family that had kin buried in churchyards would take care of its own graves.

That didn't mean that the old graves, or those of strangers who had died in the community were allowed to go to rack, though once in a while you would find a place where that happened.

Most of the places we lived, there would be a special day some time in the summer, for cleaning the graveyard to its farthest corners. The weeds might grow up a little before that, but for the rest of the year every grave would be nice, and flowers were often planted then.

The day for the graveyard cleaning was a big one, generally a Saturday. It would be published from the pulpit for two or three weeks in advance, and everyone would be on hand, with hoes, and rakes, and mattocks, the finest tool ever devised by man for grubbing out roots. It takes work, though. Father used to say nobody would ever steal a mattock, because anyone low-down enough to steal wouldn't want anything that made as much work as a mattock.

We'd gather about eight or nine o'clock in the morning, and dig, and rake, and burn piles of weeds and leaves; and the air would be sweet with the scent of flowers and wood smoke. By eleven nearly all the work would be done. Then there would be a few songs in the church, and a short sermon, sometimes, and then the ladies would spread dinner under the trees in the grove, with fried chicken, and stack pie, and most everything good.

In the evenin' (what the Yankees call the afternoon) the

young folks would go for walks or buggy or horseback rides, and the old folks would stand around and renew old friendships, till the crowd gradually broke up and went home towards supper time.

For many an old church, the annual graveyard cleaning was the only service of the year, long after it had given up, as folks moved away to town.

The churchyard was always a quiet place for a walk, or to pass the time while we waited for preachin' to begin. Memories clung to the cool, gray stones, and many a story was in the inscriptions on them.

There was the slab on which we read:

"Ann Eliza Coleman Ware, who died in New Orleans August 23, 1854, aged 22 years, five months and 19 days.

"Though her life was short, she endured more of sorrow and suffering than many of far beyond her years, but retained a firm faith which helped her to bear all her troubles to the end."

Ann Eliza Coleman had married a man from New Orleans and gone there to live. Rumor said that Fred Ware wasn't good to her during the two and a half years before she died of yellow fever. And another legend said that it was not really her body that was sent home for burial.

It probably grew out of her mother's anguished cry when the opened coffin showed her wasted form: "Oh, that's not my Annie." But the rumor grew so strong that several years later the grave was opened and the casket lid lifted high enough to show her cloud of red gold hair filling the box; looking, men said, almost like excelsior.

Nor did we ever forget the story marked out by the wrought iron fence that surrounded the graves of Joe and Will Cunningham and Kate Langston Cunningham, who lay between them.

Joe, the older brother, was engaged to Kate before he went away to fight for the South in the War Between the States. But a year later he had died of typhoid while fighting in Virginia, and his body was brought home for burial.

Another year and Will had gone to war, from which he came home safe after Lee's surrender, a youth of just under twenty one.

It was then that Kate wrote him a letter, reminding him of her love for Joe. "If you wish to take his place," she concluded, "come to see me."

Will called on her, and later they were married, and lived happily together for many years. She bore him six children, and ever she wore on her breast the old brooch twined from the hair of both brothers.

After her death Mr. Cunningham found among her papers a poem written in her fine, copperplate hand, which began:

Bury me by my first love, Will.

Will proved his devotion by burying Kate beside Joe. And when his time came he was buried on her other side, and their children closed in the three graves with the fence.

And whenever anyone spoke of a devotion that went beyond the bounds of life and death, we would quote the first line of her poem, and remember the long years through which she never forgot.